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Week 5

Vygotsky and the Zone of Proximal Development

Tomei (ed), Lawrence A.. "Chapter V - Varieties of Authentic Assessment—Vygotsky and the Zone of Proximal Development". Encyclopedia of Information Technology Curriculum Integration. IGI Global. © 2008. Books24x7.

The article begins with a summary of Vygotsky’s major tenet, that learning takes place most effectively within a social context. The author uses Vygotsky’s example of a finger pointing, which to an infant is meaningless until he interacts with others and comes to learn from them that it does indeed have a meaning. The implication for the classroom seems to be obvious that we need to allow students more time to interact with peers. Through these interactions, things that were once meaningless will hopefully gain meaning. I saw an example of this the other day when using the Aviary music creator. To most students, the boxes on the side held no meaning until one student used one of the side boxes to change their sounds. Another student heard the guitar sound and wanted to change their sound. With two students now using different sounds, all of a sudden all students wanted to change their sounds. We went over how to do so. It was an efficient use of time because the students were using the program just fine without that knowledge, but upon hearing someone else use it they were driven to learn how to replicate the first students results.

The article continues with a discussion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). It discusses how teachers should strive to meet students in their ZPD to maximize their learning experience by helping them reach their level of independence through the use of modeling and other scaffolding techniques. I actually completed a paper for our second class on the intersection between ZPD and one-to-one laptop programs. My conclusion stated that while Vygotsky would take issue with the one-to-one laptop use in regard to how it can isolate students, he would likely approve of how they can be used to combat curriculum narrowing by helping teachers reach each student in his or her own ZPD through rapid assessment. He would also most likely appreciate how they offer teachers a means to scaffold learning and a variety of ways to reach learners. Moreover, Vygotsky would probably appreciate how laptops give students a tool to broaden their experience and vocabulary which will only enhance a student’s understanding of their world. To Vygotsky, this would have been a benefit likely to outweigh any other drawbacks.

The third section of the article talks about Vygotsky’s predisposition towards students participating in authentic activities. This is one I struggle with, not on a philosophical level, but on a practical level. Philosophically, I could not agree more. I believe too many situations we create in schools for students are contrived and not related to the “real world”. On the other hand, in my subject of music it can be difficult to bring in music the kids experience outside of school because of the content’s inappropriateness. It can also be difficult to give them authentic audience’s beyond each other. Where my philosophy and practicality agree, though, is that content knowledge (dynamic/tempo terms, reading the staff, etc.) are often secondary or tertiary to student interactions with music or compositions. In short, I want students creating or performing even if that means they aren’t using content vocabulary or are unable to actually notate what they performed or accomplished. This is a somewhat controversial stance that I am sure you and I could discuss more in depth if you so desire. I do feel quite comfortable in saying it is likely the single most important issue facing music educators in the upcoming decade as the standards movement progresses.

The final section of the artcle is an all-too brief discussion of the intersection between Vygotsky’s ideas and instructional technology. Essentially, the author argues that in light of Vygotsky’s call for social learning and authentic experiences, technology should be thoughtfully implemented beyond drill-and-kill sessions and multimedia presentations/research projects. The author suggests utilizing technology in a way that allows students to creatively and collaboratively solve authentic problems. One of the best examples of this I have seen was on the video of the middle school in Oregon we watched the other week. The problem with such work, as I see it, is that it goes against the fatal attraction schools currently hold with their pacing guides. In my mind, Vygotsky would most likely be horrified at the idea of pacing learning in such a lock-step scheduled manner. In short, we have the behaviorist model on one hand which says learning can be scheduled and technology should be used to enrich and contribute to that schedule, whereas on the other hand we have the social constructivists calling for an end to the scheduled curriculum and allowing students to work at their own pace using authentic tools on authentic problems.